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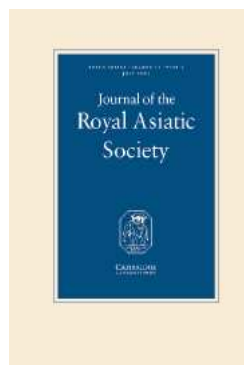
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Invention of Tradition in Travancore: A Maharaja's

*Quest for Political Security**

DICK KOOIMAN

Up until the British departure from India, in 1947, hundreds of Indian princely states succeeded in maintaining a semi-autonomous existence beneath the wide umbrella of British paramount power. These states, which were scattered over the whole subcontinent, ranged from large and imposing to tiny and insignificant, and were dominated by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh ruling elites.

In the course of the nineteenth century, official exchanges between these Indian princes and representatives of colonial government became more frequent and more formalised. The idiom of these interactions was a strange amalgam of the signs and symbols used by the group that formerly dominated the subcontinent, the Mughals, and elements derived from European court ceremonial, which had been introduced by the new rulers from Great Britain. After the suppression of Mutiny and the abolition of the Mughal dynasty, the first Viceroy of India, Lord Canning, spent much time holding *darbars* during which *khilats* (robes of honour), *jagirs* (grants of land) and material rewards were given to loyal princes and local elites. The Indian system of royal titles was researched in order to understand their hierarchy, and such high-sounding titles as Raja and Nawab were, henceforth, bestowed upon princely rulers or British-Indian subjects only by the Viceroy.¹

While the use of Mughal imagery in theory validated British authority throughout India it also, as Manu Bhagavan has rightly observed,² wrote the Indian princely rulers into the colonial narrative. Perceived traditional forms of Indian rule and ritual were joined by imperialist visions of political relations that found expression in armorial bearings, military parades, gun salutes and orders of chivalry derived from European ceremonial. The Indian princes were seen as feudal subsidiaries of the British Crown, especially after the Royal Titles Act of 1876 in which Queen Victoria was declared *Kaiser-i-Hind* or Empress of India. Her adoption of this title was announced at an Imperial Assemblage in Delhi (1876/7), which was hosted by Viceroy Lord Lytton. On that occasion, the Indian princes – as the Queen-Empress' most loyal Indian feudatories – were organised in an Indian peerage and received banners, gun salutes and other marks of distinction, based entirely on European

* I gratefully acknowledge the useful suggestions and corrections received from John McLeod, Manu Bhagavan and Michael Fisher. Funds for travel and research were kindly granted by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NOW), The Hague.

¹ Indian princely rulers retained the right to grant these titles to their own subjects, see C. L. Tupper, *Indian Political Practice: a collection of the decisions of the Government of India in political cases* (Calcutta, 1895), vol. III, p. 207.

² Manu Bhagavan, *Sovereign Spheres: princes, education and empire in colonial India* (New Delhi, 2003), p. 17.

conceptions of feudality. In his famous study of this Assemblage, published in the volume *'The Invention of Tradition'*, Bernard Cohn describes the organisation and underlying ideas of this Assemblage in wonderful detail. His analysis of this carefully orchestrated event covers the whole of princely India but is strongly focused on what happened in Delhi at the turn of the year 1876/77, when Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India.³ What I want to discuss here is the process of feudalisation through ceremony for one state in particular, Travancore, but for a much longer period, namely from the second half of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of the Second World War. Moreover, I will restrict myself to a discussion of just one major element of the feudal ceremonial, that is, the armorial bearings.

As part of the Imperial Assemblage in January 1877, the Viceroy, acting in the name of the Queen-Empress, was to present 90 ruling princes with large banners upon which were emblazoned their armorial bearings modelled after European patterns. However, only 63 of them – including Hyderabad and Baroda – actually turned up. These coats of arms – which had been designed by Robert Taylor, a Bengal civil servant with an amateur interest in heraldry – were embroidered and fixed on large silken standards. The devices created by Taylor related to his conception of the mythic origins of the various ruling houses, their identification with particular deities, and the topographic features of their territories, and incorporated some ancestral emblem associated with a ruling house.⁴

As acknowledged by Sir Owen Tudor Burne, private secretary to the Viceroy and *auctor intellectualis* of this event, the presentation of these banners with arms created some embarrassment among the Indian princely beneficiaries. The poles proved to be of such enormous weight “as to require two Highlanders to carry this symbol of the Viceroy’s regard”,⁵ and it was not clear to the Indians what they should do with them. Also, the triumphant mood in imperialist quarters was seriously dampened by the critical comments on the matter in the British Parliament. Nevertheless, Burne had no doubt that the Assemblage was “one of the best acts, from an Eastern point of view, of his [Lytton’s] administration”.⁶ Lytton also wanted a College of Arms in Calcutta, to serve as an Indian equivalent of the British College of Arms in London, but that was never actually established.

The main argument of this article will be that armorial bearings were virtually imposed on the states, which – as in the case of Travancore – were at best indifferent towards receiving this mark of regal distinction and possibly even reluctant. Lord Lytton, however, wanted to honour the states with banners carrying ‘their’ arms and, if no arms could be found, then they were to be invented. Remarkably, much later the rulers of Travancore came to appreciate these honours considerably more than Lytton could ever have imagined. On the eve of the Second World War, the state of Travancore made an earnest attempt to have its armorial bearings officially registered with the College of Arms in London. But by that time the British Government had become much less eager to distribute this kind of ceremonial privilege. The main issue to be discussed here is how and why these shifts in attitude took place.

³ B. S. Cohn, ‘Representing Authority in Victorian India’, in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 203; B. N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States*. The New Cambridge History of India, Vol. III, 6 (Cambridge, 2004), p. 91.

⁵ Owen Tudor Burne, *Memories* (London, 1907), p. 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

Several researchers have noted the great concern Indian rulers had with their ceremonial status, which, according to John McLeod, they prized almost as highly as the powers pertaining to their sovereignty.⁷ The British, who were similarly obsessed with status and the attendant attributes, were quite zealous when it came to conferring or withholding ceremonial privilege as these were thought to be “cheaper expedients as instruments of authority than soldiers and bullets”.⁸

These observations do not explain why Indian rulers attached so much importance to the honours bestowed by their colonial masters. Here Barbara Ramusack has put forward an attractive argument. Since the British-Indian government no longer allowed the Indian princes to fight one another on the battlefield, they “now attempted to best each other in the world of symbols”.⁹ She considers the salute table the prime arena for that contest, but armorial bearings and other symbols were also part of the contest. Other researchers have noted a similar shift: whereas in the past ruling families had tried to earn *izzat* (honour) for their family and state by fighting each other, under colonial conditions they attempted to do so by accumulating honours. The British government was the main source of these honours.¹⁰ Resistance was another consideration. After their loss of political freedom, the Indian princes could turn to public ceremonial as another domain in which to defy the growing British influence.¹¹

These explanations for a shift in princely preoccupations are rather general in nature and lack a clear time perspective. Ramusack becomes more specific by pointing to the end of the subordinate isolation of the princes after the First World War, especially following the inauguration of a Chamber of Princes in 1921, as a major factor in intensifying the conflict among the princes over salutes and other distinctions. Here, I want to follow the same line of thought by trying to relate Travancore’s growing interest in the previously neglected arms and banners to a gradually changing political situation both in British India and in the state itself. For that purpose I will make use of Martin Doornbos’s discussion of the inverse correlation between processes of ceremonialisation and institutionalisation. Doornbos argues that a growing passion for ceremonial distinctions may be attendant on, and a compensation for, a weakening of the institutions that support the political power concerned. This conclusion is based on his study of Ankole kingship in Uganda, which will be summarised here as it seems eminently suited to explain similar developments in Travancore.

To become institutionalised, a political structure or administrative organisation must be accepted and legitimised in terms of the norms and values of the society concerned. When a centrally placed institution, such as a ruling dynasty, loses its essential purpose, it may fall into oblivion. Alternatively however, it may be exalted into higher spheres and become

⁷ John McLeod, *Sovereignty, Power, Control: politics in the states of western India 1916–1947* (Leiden, 1999), p. 30.

⁸ Charles W. Nuckolls, “The Durbar Incident”, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 24(3), 1990, p. 531.

⁹ Barbara Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of Empire: dissolution of a patron-client system, 1914–1939* (Columbus, 1978), p. 15.

¹⁰ John McLeod, “The English Honours System in Princely India, 1925–1947”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, series 3, vol. 4(2), 1994, p. 241. The question is more widely discussed in McLeod, *Sovereignty, Power, Control*, pp. 251–255.

¹¹ See my “Meeting at the Threshold, at the Edge of the Carpet or Somewhere in Between: questions of ceremonial in princely India”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 40(3), 2003, p. 332.

increasingly decorated with gilt and glitter. After the mid-1930s, Ankole kingship suffered from institutional decline and loss of effective power, as its presence or absence no longer made any difference to the overall social and political process. At the same time, attention was increasingly focused on the ceremonial aspects of kingship as a result of which the Ankole monarchy became quite lavishly adorned.

In 1945 the *engazi* (chief minister) approached the district commissioner, requesting the colonial government to kindly provide a coronation chair. Asked about the symbolic decorations to be incorporated in the chair, the *engazi* forwarded a sketch of the royal drum to the commissioner, stating that: "As you know this better than I do, I request you to incorporate some decoration in the chair you may deem suitable". Similar searches for symbolism occurred in regard to other royal attributes. In 1944, the *engazi* suggested that the government might grant a crown for the *omugabe* (ruler) to wear on his coronation day, and the title of queen for his wife. Also a royal standard was designed for the *omugabe*, set on yellow cloth with his coat of arms – drums in white and a lion in brown – against a black background.

The provincial commissioner was right in surmising that a crown and a coat of arms were a novelty for the Ankole and had little to do with their tradition. Yet, his reluctance to grant such ceremonial attributes stemmed not from their lack of traditional referents but from a premise that too much exaltation should be avoided. Judging from the tone of the commissioner's communications, there seemed to be some fear that a too explicit recognition of royalty might elicit aspirations that could prove harmful to regular administration and be inconsistent with British plans for Uganda's political future. As far as Ankole politics and society were concerned Doornbos concludes; after the Second World War the Ankole monarchy had become a redundant institution whose discontinuance made little particular difference to the socio-political framework.¹²

The next section gives an account of the creation of Travancore's armorial bearings in 1876/7 as a case of a locally invented tradition. That will be followed by a discussion of the renewed interest in this tradition in the 1930s. In explaining Travancore's remarkable shift in position vis-à-vis arms and banners, this article will argue that its ruling family was moved not only by considerations of interstate rivalry and symbolic resistance, but also by, as in the case of the Ankole in Uganda, a quest for political security in view of an increasingly uncertain political future. For that purpose it makes use of the Crown Representative's Records as preserved in the Oriental and India Office Collections in the British Library in London. Even though the records on this subject are incomplete and the handwritten letters are sometimes difficult to decipher, they contain sufficient information with which to construct an argument.

The Creation of Armorial Bearings for Travancore

Travancore, which was tucked away on the southwestern tip of the Indian peninsula, had entered into a treaty alliance with the British at an early date. Under the treaty the state

¹² Martin R. Doornbos, 'Institutionalization and Institutional Decline', in Henri J. M. Claessen, Pieter van de Velde and M. Estellie Smith (eds), *Development and Decline: the evolution of socio-political organization* (Massachusetts, 1985), pp. 23–35. My colleague Françoise Companjen kindly drew my attention to this article. A better known South Asian example is provided by Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: ethnohistory of an Indian kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987), showing how the crown of the state of Pudukkottai was "hollowed out" and replaced with a theatre state by colonial intervention.

continued to enjoy some freedom of political manoeuvre, but its powers were rigorously restricted, especially in the field of military defence and foreign policy. Nevertheless, the British considered princes like the ruler of Travancore as powerful leaders who held the confidence of their subjects. According to Lord Lytton, who hosted the Imperial Assemblage in 1876/7, the Indian peasantry was an inert mass which, if it ever moved at all, would “move in obedience, not to its British benefactors, but to its native Chiefs and Princes...”.¹³ Therefore it became the policy of Lytton, and those who succeeded him in office, to secure the complicity of these natural leaders and to make use of the respect they enjoyed among their people to strengthen the stability of British rule. With the growth of Indian nationalism this policy proved a failure, as the state’s populace refused to abide by their “natural leaders”.¹⁴ However, after 1876/7 the distribution of honours was deliberately used, both to acknowledge the importance of the princes and to stress their position as subsidiary allies. The princes themselves were in no doubt about their importance but disliked the connotation of subordination that accompanied the honours received.

Discussions about banners and arms for Travancore had begun long before the preparations for the Imperial Assemblage. Although the ruler of the state, Ayilyam Tirunal Varma (1860–80), was a conservative man in social and religious matters, he made strenuous efforts to modernise his state’s existing system of government, education and internal transport. In recognition of His Highness’ excellent administration, the Government of Madras informed him that Her Majesty the Queen had been graciously pleased to confer upon him the high and exalted dignity of Knight Grand Commander of the Star of India (1866).¹⁵ All Knight Grand Commanders of that order received banners with arms, and at an investiture they were obliged to wear the robes of the Order and to have borne before them their banners on which their heraldic arms were blazoned.

Thus, the Maharaja of Travancore was already in possession of a banner with arms. Nevertheless, when a new investiture was to be held in Calcutta (1875), the Foreign Department, which was in charge of relations with the Indian states, sent a letter to Major Woulfe Hay, Acting Resident in Travancore, asking him to enquire whether His Highness the Maharaja of Travancore had his robes and banner. The Foreign Department seemed to be uncertain about this matter and urged that, if a coat of arms had not yet been fixed, no time should be lost in devising one. The Department even went so far as to recommend some Calcutta firms that could supply the requisites, and mentioned Dykes & Co as the firm preparing banners for most of the rulers who would attend. This firm wanted to be favoured with information “as to anything remarkable or peculiar in the history of His Highness’ family, and as to any crest, which may have been used in the family”. As it was known that the Maharaja used as a sort of badge a conch shell whose spiral was reversed, Dykes & Co

¹³ Quoted in Cohn, ‘Representing Authority’, p. 191.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, scions of princely families continue to exert considerable influence in Indian party politics, illustrating the possible residual value of a princely heritage in an electoral system. See Ramusack, *Indian Princes*, p. 8.

¹⁵ V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual* (Trivandrum, 1906), vol. I, p. 553; Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: society and politics in Travancore, 1847–1908* (New Delhi, 1976), pp. 71 ff. In the same year, the Viceroy directed that henceforth the ruler of Travancore should be addressed by the title of Maharaja in all communications from the British Government, see “Honours: the title of Maharaja”, R/2/897/353 in Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC), London.

suggested that this shell on a shield of his favourite colour could make his coat of arms. A seahorse could be used for the crest, if the Palace had no better suggestion.

The Maharaja replied to Major Hay, saying that he had a robe and banner. They had newly been made at the suggestion of the secretary to the order for the investiture of the Begum of Bhopal in Bombay in 1872. He submitted the same for Hay's inspection, and added with hardly concealed indifference that "if you think the same will do for the present occasion also it looking quite new, I shall take it with me to Calcutta but if you think a new one should be made for the present occasion you will be good enough to make the necessary arrangements as you deem expedient in communication with the secretary in the foreign department". Major Hay consulted the Foreign Department, which replied that the robe and banner from 1872 would do very well for the occasion and that nothing further was required.¹⁶

Nevertheless, as the Imperial Assemblage drew nearer, Travancore was again questioned about the existence of any family banners or armorial bearing and their particulars, this time by the Government of Madras. In his reply, the newly appointed Resident, MacGregor, submitted some hand-made drawings of the armorial bearings "if they can be called such" of Travancore and the neighbouring state of Cochin. Travancore's showed a conch shell, and Cochin's a palanquin with candlestick, umbrella and conch shell. Carmichael of the Government of Madras wanted them to be painted before being sent to the Government of India. He wrote "Haven't you got some artists in Travancore who will understand these things?", but no reply was given, or at least none has been preserved in this file.

The Resident also informed the Madras government that the Foreign Department in Calcutta had designed a banner for the ruler of Travancore "for the Installation", most probably referring to his installation in the Order of the Star of India. As the paper on which this letter was written is now crumbling, the description of this banner is barely readable, but there is mention of "... the conch shell ... his Emblem, ... in gold. I think an [in?] blue tab. The Dewan drafted the flags in peagreen & a flag made ... by the Chief Engineer to fly at Allapey had a white chank shell on a red ground".¹⁷ When consulted about Travancore's arms and colours, the Dewan evinced general ignorance in this matter and only added to the confusion. He informed the Resident on 16 October 1876 that Shungoony Menon, northern Dewan Peishcar, was writing a 'History of Travancore'. Menon had conceived a coat of arms for Travancore and had had it engraved and painted by an artist, to be used as frontispiece in his work. "He will probably show it to you today", wrote the Dewan, suggesting that this product of the writer's fantasy might be what the central government had in mind for the occasion of the Imperial Assemblage. The emblem of the Travancore ruling family is the conch shell, he confirmed. "For national colour His Highness will prefer light yellow, as being the colour of the ripe corn and fruits of the earth thus denoting prosperity". Asked about the motto of the ruling family, he replied that it was "Charity our household deity".¹⁸

¹⁶ All correspondence, handwritten, August–November 1875, in "A Banner for the Maharaja of Travancore", in R/2/879/4.

¹⁷ Letter from Resident MacGregor, Courtallam 6–10–1876, to Carmichael, Government of Madras, in R/2/879/6.

¹⁸ J. D. Rees, Resident in Travancore (1895–97), thought this motto well-deserved, as the Travancore state used to feed pauper scholars and Brahmins, no matter how well able they were to feed themselves, see J. D. Rees, *The*

On 17 October 1876, a letter was sent to Travancore, by Mr Taylor in Calcutta, who was designing princely arms and banners for the forthcoming Assemblage. Taylor was becoming impatient, as the date of the Imperial Assemblage was nearing and the Viceroy had insisted that banners and armorial bearings “for the Delhi tamasha” should be completed before the end of the year, even for those princes who had shown no interest in attending the Assemblage, such as Travancore and Cochin. He dismissed the shade of yellow, which had been mentioned in earlier letters as a suitable colour for Travancore, as it might indicate “some pretty picture but no heraldic arms”.¹⁹ Apparently, he preferred to think of prancing horses and smoking guns. The same day he sent a telegram to the Resident in Trivandrum with similar questions, urging that information on Travancore was still wanted, “colour named indicating design not heraldic”.²⁰

The Maharaja could not keep aloof from this discussion about what was to become his family tradition. At the end of the month he sent the Resident a slightly modified copy of the design he had handed to Mr G. A. Ballard, who had been Resident until 1874. It is not clear whether the Maharaja had made the design personally or had merely issued the necessary instructions. In any case, the accompanying letter makes it abundantly clear that he approved of the design and considered it good enough to serve the purpose. The Maharaja thought that the following notes might interest the Resident. First of all, the Maharaja noted that the conch shell – the chief emblem of his state and one of the four holdings of Vishnu – occupied the midpoint. The shell was in the centre of a native flag or banner, which was held by two elephants. These elephants had been introduced for several reasons. As the Maharaja explained: “they are the most characteristic and the noblest of the indigenous mammalia and moreover, the ablution of coronation of Lakshmi, our goddess of prosperity, is said to have been performed by celestial elephants posed as in the devices”.

The elephants held in their uplifted proboscis the chief products of the country, namely a coconut palm – which gave “the name of Keralanes” to the whole southern coast – and a sheaf of paddy. As at that time the cultivation of coffee was making great progress, the Maharaja commented, with a fine understanding of the dynamics of tradition, that: “probably in a second edition of the devices a coffee twig will have to be added!” At the bottom, a lotus flower supported the state sword and the feet of Sri Padmanabha, the state’s tutelary deity. According to Keralolpatti and other local historiographic traditions, the king of Travancore received a crown with Sri Padmanabha’s feet on the division of the old Kerala Empire. Hence, the dynasty was designated ‘Trippappur swarupam’, as Trippappur was the name of the swarupam (branch) of the royal family. The inner circle around the devices contained the pepper vine (which, the Maharaja wrote, was also a characteristic product of the country), but it is not clearly visible in the copy shown here. The outer circle bore two

Real India (London, 1908), p. 284. This tradition inspired Samuel Mateer, missionary of the London Missionary Society, to title his study of Travancore *The Land of Charity* (London, 1871).

¹⁹ Yellow is, indeed, not one of the five colours that in the English tradition can be used on coats of arms (personal communication from John McLeod).

²⁰ All correspondence in ‘Armoial Bearings for Travancore & Cochin’, R/2/879/6. After her retirement in 1931, the ex-Maharani Regent of Travancore demanded that the Nayar Brigade when honouring her should carry colours, as in the case of an earlier ex-Regent, Gowri Paravathi Bayi after 1829. Resident Pritchard, consulting the Brigade Orders, found no reference to colours and observed that even in 1932 there was no officially recognised state colour, see R/1/1/2164.

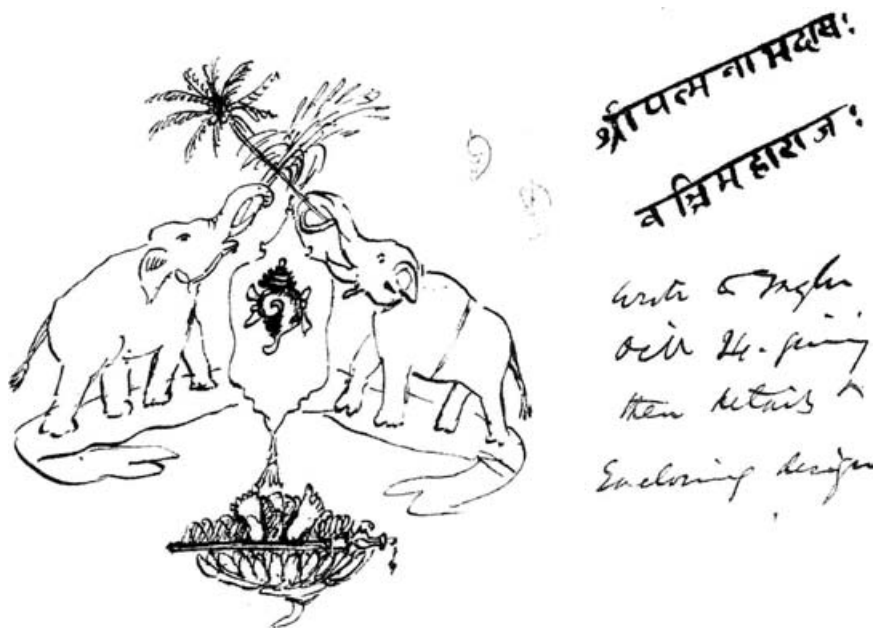


Fig. 1. Design of armorial bearings for Travancore enclosed with the Maharaja's, letter 21-10-1876, R/2/879/6.

titles of the Maharaja in Devanagiri characters. The upper one stood for 'Sri Padmanabha Dasah', which means servant of Sri Padmanabha. That title was, the Maharaja thought, well known, as it formed the very beginning of his long list of titles. The lower one ran "Vanchi Maharaja". Vanchi was one of Travancore's names and figured in the ruler's list of titles. "I think that on the whole the device is good", concluded Ayilyam Tirunal, the ruler of Travancore. On a reduced scale it would do as a state seal, and a little enlarged or even on this scale, it would be suitable for a shield or banner. He ended his letter in a rather light-hearted tone by commenting that "You need not return the design if you can make any use of it".

A similar letter, explaining the design made for Cochin and most probably written by the Dewan of that state, was also received by MacGregor. It informed the Resident that from time immemorial the Rajas of Cochin had used as emblems of royalty a conch shell with lamp and umbrella surmounted by a palanquin. These emblems were supposed to have belonged to Cheraman Perumal, king of the whole of Malabar, and to have been inherited from him by the rulers of Cochin, who were his rightful heirs and successors. After giving several particulars about the state's guardian deities, the letter told the Resident that "the colour of our flag appeared always to have been red and white". No motto had as yet been adopted by the Rajas of Cochin, and the letter concluded by saying that His Highness did not seem to have any particular preference.

All these letters were forwarded to Calcutta but failed to satisfy Mr Taylor: they either arrived too late or did not contain the information he was looking for. At the end of October 1876, he sent another impatient letter asking for information, which if submitted in time

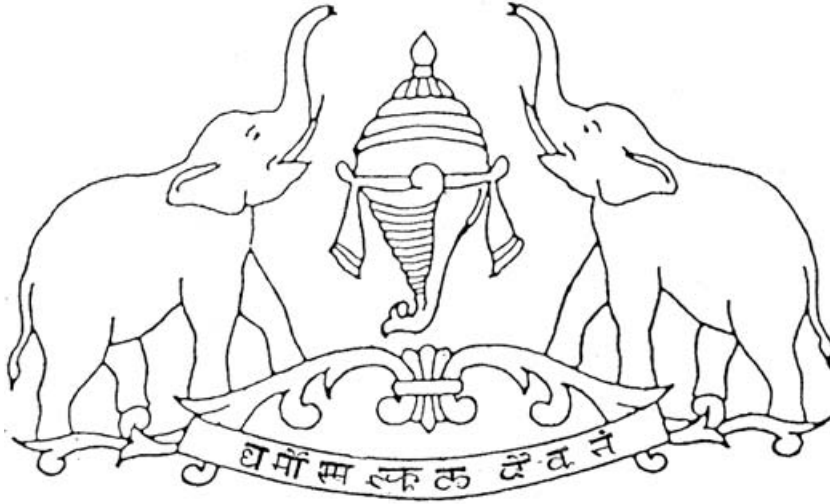


Fig. 2. Travancore arms, designed by Robert Taylor 1877, in Andre Flicher, *Drapeaux et Armoiries des Etats Princiars de l'Empire des Indes* (Dreux, n.d.), Kenneth Robbins Collections, Virginia USA.

might enable him “to get alterations made”. The wording suggests that Taylor had his own designs ready at hand, if nothing was forthcoming. And he had to use his own fantasy, as he considered the durbar’s design absolutely useless. “I have to prepare coats with supporters & crest according to my rules”, he wrote, as the design he had received “was like nothing for even a [...] peer’s coat in England”. Also, he said he was puzzled about the colours: whereas the banner for the Maharaja, as prepared for the investiture in Bombay (1872), was white with a band of ochre, he had now been told that the flags were red and orange, and that the durbar colour was a pale yellow.²¹

This is the last extant letter in the file. The rulers of Travancore and Cochin did not attend the grand Assemblage in Delhi, but in their absence their colonial masters presented them with royal banners and arms. Taylor had followed his own ideas in designing them, but had made use of much that he had found helpful in the correspondence received from the two Madras states. As can be seen from the drawing of the Travancore arms, Figure 2, the two elephants with trunks raised had remained as the main heraldic device, but without most of the trappings the Maharaja had earlier suggested. A silver conch, like the elephants drawn in red outlines, was in the centre and the black letters of the motto were on a silver ribbon. The compartment was also silver, drawn in red.

The two elephants and the silver conch return in the state flag, coins and seals. In some versions one may note the presence of a floral wreath, which encloses the conch shell and is tied at the bottom by a ribbon. The Cochin arms were largely similar, with the shell, lamp and umbrella under a palanquin in the centre. Most probably the two elephants were patterned after the two lions in the arms of the colonial government. Whereas the

²¹ Letter from the Maharaja of Travancore, 21 October 1876, and letter from Ernadulam, Cochin, 23 October 1876 to MacGregor, Resident, and letter from Taylor, Calcutta, 26 October 1876, in R/2/879/6.

British motto on the central, crowned shield on top ran “Honni soit qui mal y pense” with “Dieu et Mon Droit” on a ribbon below it, Cochin later adopted “Honour is our Family Treasure”.²²

Renewed Interest in Travancore Arms

For a long time, nothing was heard about the Travancore banners and arms. Then, about sixty years later, the subject was taken up again, this time not by the British government but by the Government of Travancore and the ruling Maharaja. As the princely family of Travancore was short of successors, it had adopted – consistent with its matrilineal principles – two princesses from a collateral branch. In 1924 the old Maharaja had died and the son of the junior princess had been installed as the new ruler, but, as he was still a minor, the senior princess was acting as Regent. Relations between the two princesses were strained from the beginning and hardly improved after the young Maharaja was invested with full powers in 1931. By that time the larger political situation had changed considerably.

The ruler of Travancore used to be the source of all power and – as he was considered the vassal of the state’s tutelary deity – his throne was surrounded by an aura of sanctity. However, the Travancore dynasty, like Ankole kingship in Uganda, became increasingly involved in a desperate fight for political survival. Under its treaty alliance with the British, the state had already given up control over its external and military affairs. Now, in the course of the twentieth century, the British government wished to bring Travancore and the other princely states into political federation with the directly administered provinces. Under these plans, which had been discussed at the Round Table Conferences and were embodied in the 1935 Government of India Act, the states also had to surrender a great part of their powers in collection of revenue, communications, and the administration of justice, as well as the concomitant right of appointment to these services. Meanwhile, the nationalist movement, which was operating at an all-India level, was also working for a scheme of political unification. The nationalist vision of an independent India left the states even less hope of a continued semi-autonomous existence and decried their rulers as the last remnants of a bygone feudal order.

In addition to attacks from above, Travancore had to cope with attacks from below. Education was spreading rapidly in the state, resulting in a high rate of literacy (29 per cent in 1931) and a vivid social consciousness. Caste associations and then political organisations emerged, all claiming their rightful share in the expanding state administration, which was heavily dominated by loyal, high caste Hindus. In successive campaigns several disadvantaged groups expressed their resentment over what they felt to be official neglect, and after much pressure the Maharaja and his Dewan in 1922 acquiesced in the opening of virtually all government departments to all castes and creeds.

In 1888 Travancore had been the first princely state to institute a legislative council. Though at first purely a deliberative body, its membership and powers gradually increased.

²² Travancore arms and banners in John D. McMeekin, *Arms & Flags of the Indian States* (1990), Vol. 2, section 7; Andre Flicher, *Drapeaux et Armoires des Etats Princiers de l’Empire des Indes* (Dreux, n.d.), by courtesy of Kenneth Robbins, Virginia USA.

Now, in response to a growing agitation for a more adequate political representation and a more responsible government, the young Maharaja in 1932 introduced constitutional reforms empowering a bicameral legislative to initiate and pass legislation. However, these reforms fell far short of expectations raised. Parties that felt under-represented refused to work the reforms and decided to abstain from the elections (the 'abstention movement'). Thereupon, Travancore became the scene of a fierce political struggle between pro- and contra-government forces. In spite of strenuous efforts on the part of the government to make the elections a success, the abstentionists achieved a considerable measure of success.²³ New reforms were proposed in 1935 and 1936, widening the franchise to about a sixth of the adult population and regrouping the constituencies. These changes offered better chances to the opposition, which reacted favourably.

In view of "the far-reaching political and constitutional changes now being debated on", the young Maharaja had appointed Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, "a trusted friend of my family",²⁴ as his legal and constitutional adviser (1931). Leaving the affairs of his family and state in these able hands, the Maharaja and his mother, the Junior Maharani, left for Europe and arrived in London (1936). On that occasion they paid a visit to the College of Arms and requested the College to design two flags with banners, one to serve as "the national flag of the state" and the other as the personal flag of the Maharaja. In compliance with this request, designs were prepared with the help of Mr Philip W. Kerr, pursuivant (Rouge Croix) of the College of Arms. The designs were approved by the ruler of Travancore. A few months later, Mr Kerr wrote to the Dewan of the state saying that he may not have made himself sufficiently clear to His Highness during the latter's visit. He explained that official registration of these new flags with arms at the College would be possible only after a formal application from the Government of Travancore through the Government of India. This initiative of Travancore opened a new debate on the banners and arms of the Indian princes.²⁵

So far as was known to the Political (formerly the Foreign) Department in India, the Thakore Sahib of Palitana was the only ruling prince who had registered his armorial bearings with the College in London (1896). The Department noted that in 1914 the India Office had drawn up a memorandum providing rules concerning applications to the College of Arms. This memorandum had never been forwarded to the ruling princes and chiefs or to the political officers, as the Secretary of State for India was not fully satisfied with its contents. Striking a note radically different from that used at the time of Lord Lytton, the Secretary of State had declared that he saw "no object in encouraging chiefs or other Indians to take out armorial bearings". The question was accordingly deferred.

At the beginning of 1937, Paul Patrick, the political secretary in London, confirmed this official political stand. In a letter to Bertrand Glancy, his counterpart in India, he wrote that the attitude of the Secretary of State was to refuse to either contest or explicitly admit a claim by Indian princes to the right to devise and bear their own arms. Registration by the

²³ Resident's Fortnightly Report for the second half of June 1933, in R/1/1/2338.

²⁴ Quoted in Louise Ouwerkerk, *No Elephants for the Maharaja: social and political change in Travancore 1921-1947* (New Delhi, 1994), edited with an introduction by Dick Kooiman, p. 73.

²⁵ Already in 1932 there was a letter on this subject from the Political Department in London to Garter Principal King of Arms, but at that time Travancore does not seem to have pursued the matter.

College of Arms would be equivalent to recognition of such a right and should thus not be encouraged. Patrick's personal view was that it was for the College of Arms and not the Secretary of State to decide whether an Indian prince could be regarded as possessing the right to devise his arms. He invited comments from India concerning whether that right applied only to rulers who exercised full powers.

The Political Department in Delhi put forward the view that the Indian princes were not the subjects of His Majesty, the King of England, but should be regarded as being in subordinate alliance with the Crown. In defence of the Indian princes, the Department stressed that they had an established right to devise and bear their own arms with supporters. Therefore, it suggested that the application forms should make it clear that applications to the College of Arms were made not for the grant and assignment of armorial bearings, but only for their registration, in order that they might receive formal recognition throughout the British Empire. Such registration had to be voluntarily, as the Department thought it impossible to compel the princes to register their armorial bearings if they did not wish to do so.

In reply to the question from London, the Department in Delhi thought it inappropriate to restrict the right to devise their own arms to rulers with full powers. Of the 122 rulers entitled to a gun salute, only 45 had full powers, and none of the salute states in western India, including Baroda with 21 dynastic guns, had the authority to try British Indian subjects for capital offences without permission. Also, it would be unjust to refuse registration to ruling princes who at the Imperial Assemblage had been presented with banners and arms by virtue of their gun salute. As it was thought unlikely that the less important states would apply for registration or that many applications for registration would be received, the Political Department in Delhi preferred to defer the delicate question about where the dividing line should be drawn. All these considerations were laid down in a letter to the India Office dated 20 May 1937.

In the summer of 1937, authorities in London and Delhi reached the following agreement. In theory it should rest with the College of Arms, as an independent tribunal, to decide whether individual princes, including those who did not exercise full powers, possessed the right to devise their own arms. In practice, however, the College would receive guidance from the Crown Representative, the new title of the Viceroy, as to whether the ruler concerned was held *prima facie* to be capable of exercising this right. The guidance was to be given by the Crown Representative in the form of a certificate concerning the status of the ruler concerned.²⁶

What followed was a long and rather technical exchange between the political secretaries in London and New Delhi, and Mr Kerr of the College of Arms about the new forms of application and the text of the certificate. The secretaries suggested some amendments in order to spare the political susceptibilities of the princes, and Mr Kerr wanted a provision for submitting a sketch to the prince before registration, since it was his experience "that designs submitted by these people may be in any form, such as Notepaper Die, or a very crude painting, so that we must tie the man down to accepting the design as it will appear on

²⁶ Correspondence between Paul Patrick, India Office London, and Bertrand Glancy, political secretary New Delhi, and internal notes Political Department New Delhi, in "Armoial Bearings Travancore", R/1/4/367.

the certificate". This 'certificate' was the official document stating that the armorial bearings had been duly entered in the records of His Majesty's College. The India Office wanted the question of procedure to be settled at an early date, as it had been informed that a large number of Indian rulers had already applied to the College of Arms to have their arms registered. In the course of 1938 most of these questions were settled, and the Resident for the Madras States was finally forwarded a copy of the form on which Travancore's application should be made.²⁷

At the same time, an application from the Raja of Jubbal (one of the Punjab Hill States) meant that the problem of the dividing line had to be dealt with. This state did not enjoy either a salute or full powers, and had not been presented with banners or armorial bearings in 1877. It would thus not seem to qualify for an application unless the privilege was extended to all ruling princes. This was the course of action the Political Department in New Delhi chose to follow. In November 1939, Harington Hawes drafted a note, which was approved by Glancy, stating that the government might reasonably support any ruler who applied for registration of his arms, provided they did not include any insignia of royalty. He added an argument that his department had used before, namely that registration placed the whole matter on a regular footing, while application offered an opportunity to ensure that no objectionable designs were included. There was ample ground to introduce a check on the inclusion of objectionable matter. In the late 1930s, the Department had to request several princes to remove symbols of royalty, such as an arched crown or a crest resembling a crown, from their coat of arms.

With its request to the College of Arms in 1936, Travancore had raised the general question of the registration of arms. A number of other states, afraid of being outstripped in the rivalry for status, had followed Travancore's example. But it seems that, after the long and time-consuming deliberations about formal procedures, the princely states had lost interest. As far as Travancore state was concerned, in September 1940 the Political Department in Delhi noted that no application had yet been received from the Maharaja, who presumably did not wish to pursue the matter for the present. No action was thought necessary, as "[t]he next move, if any is to be made, rests with His Highness".²⁸ That move was never made.

Concluding Observations

The distribution of ceremonial honours, such as that of banners with arms in 1876/7, was meant to formalise a feudal past that had never really existed apart from in the British imagination. In spite of that, in the 1930s the Travancore government and its ruling family placed a high value on these distinctions, exactly at a time when the British government felt embarrassed by its earlier generosity in their distribution.

In the 1930s no one openly questioned the position of the ruler of Travancore, who now, like his fellow princes, frequently referred to the feelings of loyalty and affection that bound him to his subjects as an argument in favour of his continued semi-autonomous existence. Yet the Travancore dynasty was becoming increasingly irrelevant. It was threatened by a loss of power, both to supra-state institutions like a new federal government and to

²⁷ All correspondence in "Registration of the Armorial Bearings of Travancore State", in R/1/4/368.

²⁸ All correspondence in "Enquiry Registration Coat of Arms 193", R/1/4/369.

local representative bodies like a legislative assembly and council, which were elected by a widening franchise. The Maharaja and Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, who in 1936 had become Dewan, tried to keep away all nationalist influences from outside and to uphold the throne, but they were fighting a lonely fight.²⁹ Like Ankole kingship, the Travancore dynasty faced the prospect of gradually becoming a redundant institution.

This background may help us to understand why the ruler and his durbar so eagerly embraced such ceremonial attributes as a coat of arms, which had been introduced by the colonial government in the nineteenth century to mark their feudal subordination. The British, however, had lost their former interest in these ceremonial distinctions, as by now they sincerely doubted the wisdom of encouraging tendencies of royalty and independence to which they could give no place in the independent India to come.

²⁹ See File 16, Madras States: Travancore 1931–1939, in L/P & S/13/1283, with fortnightly reports from the British Resident, correspondence, and local newspaper cuttings.